

A Swedish Volunteer's Haiti Relief Experience

Written by Johan Alwall
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What an unbelievable journey!

First of all, the pure scale of destruction. It is really impossible to understand, impossible to imagine, no matter how many news report photos you see, until you have seen it with your own eyes. The majority of houses are nothing but rubble, including almost every single house above two stories, and of the houses that are still standing, the vast majority have incredibly large structural damage that they will have to be torn down. Haiti has basically been razed to the ground.

The second thing that struck me, going through the streets in our car, was the people. How strong, dignified and beautiful they are; despite all that has happened, despite living for two months in tents at best, their clothes are always clean and neat, and their posture is straight and proud. When I got to interact more closely with them, I also so strongly felt their warmth, how they would start talking to you as soon as you come close, how they would treat you as a good friend, and how they manage to find joy, singing and dancing, in the midst of disaster and impossible living conditions, despite perhaps not having eaten in two days.

I experienced this many times during the trip, perhaps most strongly at the first relief aid distribution, the day after I arrived. I came to the National Stadium where the distribution was being held in the second round of cars, and when I came into the stadium, there was a large crowd in the field in front of the stadium seats. Some volunteers were playing music (“We are the world” and “Hello hello hello”) and dancing and doing sign language to entertain the crowd, and I joined them. The response was amazing! Many of the people in the field were dancing, waving their hands in the air or at least listening and watching intently, with a smile on their lips. One of the Brazilian United Nations peacekeepers said that we had just “made his day” as he had never before experienced something like this at an aid distribution.

A little later, I was assigned as the first person to greet the goods recipients as they got seated for the ceremony, and once again the response was full of warmth. My smiles, bows with palms together and words of greeting were invariably answered with a smile, a “bonjour” or “salut”, and most of the time with a small bow or gesture of greeting. It was clear that such a display of respect and love, human-to-human, from aid donors was something new to them, and that it was highly appreciated.



So many memories to choose from! Some of the strongest are from our meeting with the Catholic sisters. Several times, I went with another volunteer, Yu-ru, to assess the situation for, or deliver relief goods to, different congregations of nuns. [Dharma Master Cheng Yen](#) has given Yu-ru a special task to find and help Catholic sisters that are in difficulty after the earthquake. Since I speak French, I could be of some help as a translator. These women are amazing! Such strength, resilience and dedication to serve the community around them. Before

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the earthquake, the congregations were running schools and clinics, which were now all in ruins. Whenever they get some food they will share with the needy around them, even if it means that they themselves have to go hungry. It was a great experience to be the one explaining what Tzu Chi is about and why we were there to them, and convey the sense of kinship and sisterhood between Master Cheng Yen and them. I also sang some Tzu Chi songs in French during the distribution ceremonies, and they were very touched, in particular by the song "Prayer". They were also very touched by Master

[Cheng Yen's letter](#)

to the earthquake survivors.

Another important aspect of the relief trip was the sharings and guidances from other Tzu Chi volunteers. My Chinese is not good enough to understand everything, but the volunteers who spoke good English were very helpful in translating what was being said during briefings, meetings and sharings. I made many good friends during the trip, especially with some of the older volunteers who gave me many insights and wisdoms, about how and why they joined Tzu Chi, their meetings with Master Cheng Yen, how to share Tzu Chi's spirit with other people, and much more.

I could see just during the week I was in Haiti how the work clearing out the rubble was intensifying, with more and more people helping, and I hope and believe that the country will soon move into a phase of reconstruction work. This might be a new start for Haiti. The Haitian people are there, they are strong and full of life, and I think that Tzu Chi's spirit, if it can be spread throughout the community, could help tremendously. In my mind, the recruiting of volunteers through the food-for-work program is one of the most important ways to do this, and I believe that the program has so far been quite successful. It was particularly touching to see the program participants help distributing relief goods with a smile, a bow and a "merci" to the recipients, and I could see that they understood why we do it in this way, and could feel the joy of giving.

Looking back on the trip, I am wondering how long it will take to readjust to my regular life. I already miss Haiti, the people, their bustling activity and life-affirmation in the midst of all the destruction, and that feeling of heart-to-heart contact that arises from our mutual respect, gratitude and friendship. I wish I could come back and help in the intermediate- and long-term rebuilding of the country (although I don't know if I have any useful expertise for this). The country is at a crossroad – the choices made at this point will determine the future of Haiti for a long, long time, and I hope that the presence of Tzu Chi will help to bring hope to the people in the country!